

Tables Shared — Self-Righteousness vs. Repentance

Summary of the August 2, 2026 Sermon

Reverend Jonathan Murray continues the *Tables Shared* sermon series by moving from last week's story of Levi—the tax collector welcomed by Jesus—to another table scene in Luke 7. This time, the person in need of transformation is not the obvious outsider, but the respected insider: Simon the Pharisee.

The sermon centers on the moment when a woman “who was a sinner” enters Simon's dinner party and begins weeping over Jesus's feet, washing them with her tears and anointing them with ointment. Simon silently judges her, assuming he knows her story. Jesus responds with a parable of two debtors—one forgiven a large debt, one a small one—and asks Simon who will love the moneylender more. Simon answers correctly, but Jesus reveals that knowing the right answer is not the same as living it.

Rev. Murray emphasizes that **self-righteousness rarely announces itself**. It shows up in subtle thoughts like “*at least I'm not like them*” or “*they should know better.*” The danger is not being wrong—it is being right in a way that blocks mercy. Jesus turns the “mirror” toward Simon, shifting the question from “*What's wrong with her?*” to “*What's happening within me?*” This becomes the heart of repentance.

To make this personal, worshippers were given small mirrors and invited to reflect silently on three questions drawn from the sermon:

- Where have I cared more about being right than showing God's love?
- Whom have I reduced to a label or political position?
- What is Jesus inviting me to see anew about myself?

Rev. Murray connects this reflection to Psalm 51: “*Create in me a clean heart... put a new and right spirit within me.*” Repentance begins not with fixing others but with letting God reveal our own hearts. Jesus loves Simon enough to show him what he cannot yet see—and Jesus does the same for us.

The sermon warns of the particular danger faced by “good, respectable, religious people”: believing that grace is for someone else. We can sit at the table with Jesus and still resent the people Jesus welcomes. The gospel calls us to humility, to relationship, and to transformation that begins with honest self-examination.

Rev. Murray invites the congregation to imagine themselves at the table with Jesus, Simon, and the woman—hearing Jesus say, “*I have room for you.*” Once we receive mercy, we can look around the table and see others differently: the ones we judged, dismissed, or

believed didn't belong. The table is not a place to prove righteousness but to discover grace—for us and for them.

The sermon concludes with a weekly practice: **“Have mercy on me, O God. Create in me a clean heart. Put a new and right spirit within me.”** Through this prayer, we learn to see one another anew, and we begin to become new ourselves.

Transcript

And listen now for the reading of the gospel as it comes from Luke chapter 3 beginning at verse 36.

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him. And when he went into the Pharisee's house, Jesus reclined to dine. And a woman in the city who was a sinner, having learned that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears, to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.

Jesus spoke up and said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you. Teacher, he replied, Speak. A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed 500 denarii and the other 50. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more? Simon answered, I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt. And Jesus said to him, You have judged rightly. Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, hence she has shown great love, but the one to whom little is forgiven loves little.

Then Jesus said to her, Your sins are forgiven.

But those who were at the table with Jesus began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? And Jesus said to the woman, Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

This is the word of the Lord.

God is still speaking.

Please be seated.

So last week we began a sermon series that follows Jesus through the tables he eats at and shares in the Gospel according to Luke. We started with Levi. Now Levi, he's one of those people. He's the wrong kind of people. In other words, he was a traitor. And I say he was a traitor because he collected taxes for the Roman Empire from his neighbors and from the community. But Jesus walks right up to the tax table where Levi is seated, and he says

to him, Follow me. And Levi stands up, leaves the table, and leaves all of his things. And then he opens his home and he throws a party, a dinner party for Jesus, and then invites a whole slew of people to share a meal. It was a table of people who had been pushed apart from society, and yet here they are welcomed. It was a table where relationship mattered more than reputation.

Jesus welcomed them and then invited them into a new life.

Today, Luke takes us to another table, but this time the person who needs transformation is not the person you might expect. And I'll give you a little warning right now. This may get a little close to home. So imagine the scene. Jesus has been invited to a dinner party by Simon, a Pharisee. Now Simon is religious. He's respectable. Simon knows the scriptures and he keeps the traditions. Simon knows how a dinner party with an honored guest is supposed to work. Well, that is until she walks in. Luke doesn't give us much information. He simply describes her as a woman in the city who was a sinner. We don't know her name. We don't know her sin. We don't know her whole story. Luke doesn't tell us. But Simon thinks he knows. But what is it that Simon thinks he knows?

I mean, how well do we really know someone else's story? What conclusions do we form because of what we do or don't know about somebody's story? Do we know the fullness of someone because we know that they voted for a particular candidate and therefore we can conclude who they are, what they believe, what they support? No, by the way. No one can know the fullness of someone's story by simply a few details.

Simon sees the woman. Jesus sees the woman. Everybody at the dinner at that table sees the woman and each of them assign a different label to her. So I'm going to ask a question and I'm interested in an answer. So if you have an answer, feel free to speak up. What do you think Simon sees? A sinner.

Sure, we're told that. In his view, a sinner.

Okay. Someone not worthy.

Someone who doesn't belong.

And what is it you think Jesus sees? Child of God. I heard that a few times. Who else? Anybody? An opportunity to make a point. Okay, opportunity to make a point. She has made poor decisions in her past, sure. But I think Jesus also sees someone who has a new future. When we first look at someone, what do we see?

Do we see a person who, like us, is created in the image of God or do we see their failures, their history, their politics, their beliefs?

See, I figured out that self-righteousness rarely announces itself. No one wakes up, today I will be self-righteous. Or in other words, today I will be a jerk. No, self-righteousness is much more subtle. It sounds like, at least I'm not like them. I would never do that. I've worked hard for what I have. Oh, they made their bed, they can lie in it. They should know better.

And while there may be some truth in those statements, self-righteousness is not about whether we are right. It's about what happens inside of us when being right becomes more important than extending the mercy we have so readily received.

Luke tells us that Simon watches Jesus welcome and accept this woman. She is crying. Her tears fall on Jesus's feet and she wipes them with her hair. She kisses his feet and she anoints Jesus's feet with ointment. And Simon says to himself, if this man were a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman this is. Simon's right. But again, self-righteousness is not about being right. This is an internal conversation. Simon never says this out loud, yet Jesus responds by telling a story. Two people owe a money lender a debt. One owes a large amount, one owes a smaller amount, but neither one can pay, and the money lender cancels both debts. And Jesus asks, which of them will love him more? And Simon says, I suppose the one for whom the greater debt was canceled. Jesus says, You have judged rightly. Is that a phrase you have ever used? It's an odd one. You have judged rightly. Simon has the right answer. Just like you and me, he can do the math. He knows what's being asked in this story. But knowing the answer isn't the same as understanding. Jesus's question of Simon brings us face to face with the areas of our lives where we know the right answer but we don't live it. What part of the gospel do you know but you don't live? We know we are called to forgive, but do we? We know we're called to love our neighbors and our strangers and enemies, but we end up picking whom we will or won't show love. We know we're called to welcome strangers, yet we end up choosing which strangers we will welcome. We profess that grace is for everybody, but do we apply it to the person who frustrates us? Jesus then turned Simon's attention to the woman. You, Simon, gave me no water for my feet, yet she has washed my feet with her tears. You, Simon, gave me no kiss, yet she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, yet she has anointed my feet with ointment. And just like that, the dinner table becomes a mirror. Simon thought he's evaluating this woman. And Jesus turns the mirror to Simon. The question is no longer what's wrong with her, but what's happening within me? That may be one of the most important movements of repentance, because repentance begins when we stop asking what's wrong with them, and we begin asking what's happening within us. So we're going to try something different this morning. You should have received a mirror when you came in. Does anybody not have one? right behind you Bill if you would Kevin here's one there we go so if you are joining us oh we've got a few more so excuse me if

you're joining online and you don't have a mirror nearby open your phone you have permission during worship open your phone Turn on the front-facing camera. It'll work just the same. But what I want you to do is to look at yourself in the mirror. Don't think about somebody else. Don't think about some other group. Don't even think about something happening within this world. I want you to look in the mirror and truly see yourself. And I'm going to ask three questions as you look in the mirror. After each question, we're going to sit in silence. You don't need to answer the question out loud, but I want you to answer honestly to yourself as you examine your heart. First question. Where have I been more concerned with being right than showing God's love. Second question. Whom have I reduced to a label, a mistake, or a political position? Third question. What is Jesus inviting me to see differently or anew about myself? So take a deep breath and think about what went through your mind, what went through your heart. Be aware of what came to your mind. Was there parts of it that you resisted? Did you think about somebody else? Or maybe you even thought, I really don't have a problem with this. Each of those is worth noticing. The mirror isn't here to shame us. It helps us see. Now Psalm 51 gives us language for repentance. Create in me a clean heart, O God, put a new and right spirit within me. That very first phrase, create in me. Not create in them or fix them. Create in me. Put a right spirit within me. That is repentance. And repentance is not about becoming better at identifying somebody else's sins. Repentance is about allowing God to reveal our own hearts to us. And that's why Jesus turns the mirror to Simon, not to humiliate him, not to say he's beyond grace. Jesus loves Simon enough to show him what Simon cannot yet see. Jesus does the same for us he invites us to look again consider the person that you've already decided you understand consider the person whose presence makes you uncomfortable and before you look at him again let Jesus look at you because the gospel is not simply that Jesus welcomes the people we've excluded the gospel is Jesus welcomes all us included and loves us enough to change us. Grace comes first, transformation follows. And transformation can begin with something as simple and as difficult as being willing to look at yourself honestly in the mirror. There's something particularly dangerous about being a good person. The danger of being respectable, responsible, generous, even good religious people is we can begin to convince ourselves that it is not us, but somebody else who needs grace. And when we start with understanding our brokenness, then we know we need grace. See, Simon's not a villain. I suspect he worshipped God faithfully with heartfelt sincerity. He knew the scriptures. I'm sure he was a good, respectable man, but he could not rejoice when grace showed up at his table. We can have a close relationship with God and still miss what God is doing. We can sit at the table with Jesus and still be offended by someone else Jesus welcomed. Maybe there's a person, maybe it's a group of people, or it's someone who makes you uncomfortable that they've been loved. Let that question sit with you and consider what does my discomfort reveal about me? Psalm 51

gives us that pathway for revelation and repentance. Have mercy on me. It doesn't begin with look how good I am. It doesn't begin with look how bad they are. Have mercy on me. Create in me a clean heart. put a new and right spirit within me. That's the movement. It goes from mercy to self-awareness to transformation to new life. What would happen if we began every difficult relationship with God have mercy on me? God show me what I cannot see. God give me a new spirit. Imagine what that prayer could do for a marriage or in a family. Imagine what it could do for a church. Imagine what it could do for a divided community or country. Gospel doesn't ask us to stop caring about truth. It asks us to stop using truth as a weapon. Gospel doesn't ask us to pretend that everything is okay. It calls us to believe that grace is stronger than any person's brokenness. Think back to when you realized you were welcomed. How God made room for you. Because once we remember that, we can begin making room for others, not because they deserve it, but to be honest, neither did we. So picture this table again. Jesus is there, Simon is there, the woman is there, the disciples are there, perhaps we are there too. And what if Jesus is looking at you, not condemning you, not excusing you, but seeing you fully? Imagine Jesus saying, I have room for you. So perhaps you receive mercy and you sit down at the table and then you, having received that mercy, you look around the table and you notice some of the others who are seated there. It's the person you've judged, the person you dismissed, the person we thought didn't belong. And Jesus is saying, look again. Because the table is not a place where we prove that we are righteous, it's a place where we discover grace. for us and for them. When we discover that, there's a shift that happens within us to humility, to relationship, to repentance. And our repentance becomes that new way of living the gospel. So this week I invite you to pray, have mercy on me, O God. Create in me a clean heart, put a new and right spirit within me. And then invite God to show you who's sitting at that table because Jesus still is sharing tables still calling us to them to become people growing into grace may we have the courage to sit down may we have the humility to listen may we have the grace to see one another anew because that's the beginning of becoming new

Amen